“NOT MY WILL, BUT YOURS, BE DONE”

Luke 22:39–46

Key Verse: 22:42

“…saying, ‘Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.’”

If you had to describe your prayer life, what one word would you use? In our series on prayer, we’ve thought about prayer that’s God-centered, prayer that’s God-dependent, bold prayer, persistent prayer, repentant prayer. Today we find another kind of prayer: obedient prayer. It’s what Satan really doesn’t want, but what our Lord Jesus wants most of all. What can we learn from Jesus’ prayer? How can we imitate him? May God speak to us through his word.

Jesus praying before his arrest is recorded in Matthew, Mark and Luke. In his Gospel, Luke writes the most about prayer, but ironically, his account of this prayer is shortest. And in these eight verses he uses the word “pray” five times. Jesus urges his disciples to pray, but he himself actually does it.

So what’s the context? Jesus and his disciples just had their last Passover meal together (11,15). At that time he shared some hard things with them. He said the Passover bread represented his body, and the cup, the new covenant in his blood (19,20). He said his betrayer had his hand on the table right there with them (21). This caused them to break out into a dispute again about which of them was to be regarded as the greatest (24). Jesus taught them the real leader is the most humble, and the one who serves (26,27). He told Peter Satan was about to sift him as wheat (31), and that he was about to deny knowing him three times (34). Jesus was trying to prepare them for the dangers and hostilities they would face without him (35,36). He was telling them he was about to be executed as a common criminal, in fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy (37; cf. Isa53:12). But when they offered him two swords, it revealed how little they understood him or what was happening (38). Their lack of understanding, especially in these last moments together, must have been hard for Jesus. So what does he do?

Look at verse 39. It says it was his “custom,” or habit, to go to the Mount of Olives. During this past week in Jerusalem, Jesus was teaching every day at the temple, but at night he went here (21:37). Luke has described that from the beginning of his ministry Jesus would withdraw to desolate places and pray (5:16). Once he went out to a mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God (6:12). He was praying alone (9:18), but he also took his top three disciples with him to pray (9:28). Prayer was indeed his custom, his habit, part of his life. Now he’s facing a kind of emergency, but this is no emergency prayer.

Verse 39b says, “…and his disciples followed him.” They’re going through the motions of following him, but verse 45 tells us they’re sorrowful due to what he’s been telling them. In the way Luke records this event, he’s putting a strong emphasis on the disciples; Jesus admonishes them at the beginning (40) and at the end (46). He takes them with him to make his example of prayer their last lesson from him as his disciples. Jesus’ prayer at this time is unique, but it’s also what he wants all his disciples to learn from and strive to imitate.

Read verse 40. This was actually the last line of what he taught them in the Lord’s Prayer: “And lead us not into temptation” (11:4b). Why is Jesus suddenly talking about temptation? Temptation is part of daily life, to be sure. There’s the temptation of money, the temptation of worldly power and glory, the temptation to test God (4:1–13). But temptation comes on especially strong when it’s time to take up our cross. Following God’s will always requires self-sacrifice and suffering, and in our human nature we just don’t want to do that. The temptation the disciples were facing now was the temptation to abandon Jesus, to deny him and save themselves. In a way, Jesus himself was facing this same temptation. Even on the cross, the devil would keep tempting him through people’s mocking words: “Save yourself!” (23:35,37,39). Jesus told his disciples to pray not to enter into temptation partly because he himself needed to pray for this.

How did he pray? Read verse 41. Jesus always kept his disciples close to him and was so concerned for them, but at some point he had to withdraw from them and come to God alone in prayer. In the same way, to really pray, sometimes we have to leave everybody and all our concerns for them, and just come to God alone. Luke tells us that Jesus “knelt down.” Posture in prayer is usually not the point. We can pray standing or sitting, in any position at any time during the day. But at this moment Jesus knelt down. His kneeling in prayer expressed earnestness. Kneeling in prayer expresses desperate need. Kneeling in prayer expresses humility. And kneeling in prayer expresses utter and complete surrender. This is not your comfortable, “lying on your back” prayer: part prayer, part relaxing. Kneeling in prayer is getting really serious with God.

And what did he say? Read verse 42. We’ve heard these words so many times we can feel numb to what they mean. But in fact, Jesus’ prayer is shocking. He knew he had to die for the sin of the world. He told his disciples, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed…” (9:22a). Later he repeated it, to let his words sink into their ears (9:44). Much later, he told them more specifically that he would “be delivered over to the Gentiles and…be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon” and after being flogged he would be killed (18:31–33a). In fact, he had just told them, “For what is written about me has its fulfillment” (22:37b). This is “the cup” Jesus had to drink. Jesus knew it was the will of God for him. And yet now, when it’s about to happen, he’s praying it won’t happen? What’s going on?

Jesus’ initial prayer request shows us, as Luke does so well, that Jesus is fully human. He was an ordinary human being, just like anybody of any race, any culture, any social class. He was made just like us in every respect (Heb2:17). And just like us, he knew the will of God, but he also had his own desire. This is why people compartmentalize their Christian faith, until what they know is one thing, and how they live is quite another. In real life, God’s will and what we want can so often be at odds with each other.

Basically, Jesus wanted to live, not die. This is normal. In fact, the desire to live may be our strongest desire. Though people may have committed many crimes and made a total mess and hurt many other people, they still cry out, “I want to live!” Though our situation may be miserable in so many ways, we still have the strong desire to live. Even when they’re over 100 years old, people are known to say, “I still have many new adventures ahead of me.” They still want to live. Jesus, being fully human, shared this same desire: as a young man about 33 years old, he wanted to live. He wasn’t a spiritual robot. His aversion to the cross wasn’t just about the physical suffering. He knew that it was where he would have to bear the full wrath of God for the sin of the world. It was where he would have to be separated from his Father God temporarily, withdrawn from his presence. In a sense, no one can fully understand what he was facing, because until now he had lived in perfect fellowship with God.

But despite his desire not to go through with it, Jesus prays. And how does he begin? He uses that one simple yet powerful word: “Father.” He’s not praying to a concept. He’s not praying to a higher power. He’s praying to a Person he knows so well, someone he’s always been with, someone he’s very sure loves him and is always listening, always caring. Through Jesus, we too have this most blessed privilege to actually call God “Father” (Jn20:17; cf. Ro8:15,16).

Because of this love relationship, Jesus is free to be honest. He tells the Father what he really wants. This is prayer—not to be correct, but to be honest. Many people have a problem being honest. Often they don’t even know what they want, much less know how to express it. But as we get to know our loving heavenly Father, we can learn to open our hearts, share with him what’s really going on, and tell him what we really want. In fact, he invites us to do it. If we’re not telling God what we really want, actually, we’re not really praying. But prayer isn’t just about getting what we want from God. Jesus goes on to say, “Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done” (42b).

Where is this coming from? These words tell us one of the most important things about Jesus we could ever learn: he genuinely loves his Father God. He’s willing to go through anything for him. Above all else, he wants his Father’s will to be done (Ps40:8). Doing his Father’s will is his greatest joy and satisfaction (Jn4:34). As his disciples, we too need to learn to love God like him, to find it our greatest pleasure to actually be doing the Father’s will. It’s ultimately about glorifying God himself. It’s not just something we’re *supposed* to do, it’s something we should passionately *want* to do. Sadly, there are too many Christians who don’t really have this on their radar; it’s still all really about “me.”

Praying for God’s will to be done sometimes feels strange, though. For one thing, it can make us feel like what we want doesn’t really matter, when it does matter to God. For another, we know that God’s will is going to be done, whether we pray for it or not, so why even pray for it to begin with? God’s will isn’t going to change just because of our prayers. God never changes, which in so many ways is actually good news. But *things* change, and *people* change. And sometimes, when people pray in faith, God *responds*. God works out his inscrutable, unchangeable will in some other way, unknown to us. There’s mystery in it. We’re never going to have it all figured out. But we need to remember that God accomplishes his will not in some ultra-spiritual invisible dimension, but through real life, ordinary people. That’s why it’s so important for us to get on board with actually doing God’s will. When we’re really in sync with God’s will, God can use us powerfully. And that can happen only through prayer.

It’s easier said than done. Look at verse 43. This verse tells us that Jesus needed God’s strength to keep on praying to get in sync with the Father’s will. We too need God’s help to strengthen our prayers. And he’ll give us that strength, even when we’re really struggling with our own desires, if we just turn to him in faith and ask him. Then the battle gets real. Read verse 44. The word “agony” stands out here. Again, we’ve heard it before, but what’s really going on? Didn’t Jesus just pray, “Not my will, but yours, be done”? Didn’t an angel just come to strengthen him? Why is he still agonizing? It’s an inner battle still raging within him, between his strong desire to live and his desire to accomplish God’s will of salvation. Again, for Jesus this agony is unique. But anyone who’s serious about doing God’s will is going to get a taste of such agony. It’s not an inner agony we just carry around, not knowing what to do with. Jesus brought this agony to God in prayer, and so should we.

It says, “And being in agony, he prayed more earnestly…” “More earnestly” means he prayed persistently until he could wholeheartedly embrace the will of God for him. If we’re really going to do God’s will, it’s always got to be done wholeheartedly. The “more earnest” prayer of Jesus at this moment is similar to his admonishment that we should always pray and not lose heart (18:1). It’s our human tendency when we’re in agony to just give up. But when God’s will is at stake, it’s not the time to give up, but to pray more earnestly, until we can really overcome ourselves.

We might experience agony in various ways, such as ordinary frustrations with things, or with people, or with situations. But a real source of agony for a Christian is ministry. Apostle Paul knew this well. He wrote to some people who were new Christians: “…my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!” (Gal4:19) He wrote a troubled church, “And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?” (2Co11:28,29). He told the Colossians about his fellow gospel worker Epaphras who was “always struggling [Gk *agonizing*] on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God” (Col4:12). “Anguish,” “anxiety,” or “agony,” as they say, “goes with the territory” of ministry, of seeing God’s will done. Ministry is never easy or convenient or comfortable. If we’re really going to engage in it, we need to learn from our Lord Jesus to bring our agonies to God and pray more earnestly.

Luke, a medical doctor, uniquely recorded a stunning detail. He writes that when Jesus was in such agony, and praying more earnestly, “…his sweat became like great drops of blood falling to the ground.” Luke must have seen such blood clots often during his medical career. This detail heightens our awareness that this decision really is a matter of life and death, the most important decision anyone in all history has ever made. God’s great plan of world salvation and his restoration of all things hung on this one decision of our Lord Jesus. Jesus is sweating not because of physical exertion, or because it’s really hot and humid; most likely it’s cool at night. And here he is, his hair and clothes completely wet, dripping with sweat. When he rejoined his disciples, this is what they saw. His profuse sweating speaks powerfully to the level of struggle he was engaged in. It’s meant to help us appreciate what he went through, all for the sake of saving us. It’s also meant to forever inspire us in our own prayers.

At the end, Luke draws a sharp contrast between Jesus and his disciples. Look at verses 45,46. He’s soaked with sweat, but he comes back and finds them sleeping. Luke is gracious in saying that they are “sleeping for sorrow,” meaning in some sense, it’s understandable. But Jesus’ final words to them, and us, are strong. Read verse 46. We all face temptations every day, but especially the temptation not to take up our cross, to save ourselves, not to obey God’s will but do what we want. As we face the new school year ministry, may God help us really heed our Lord Jesus’ words: “Rise and pray.” May we learn to bring our agonies to God and pray fervently like him: “Not my will, but yours, be done.”